

Mechanical Troubles

One of the adventures of traveling in Africa is that sooner or later you may experience some kind of vehicle problems. A couple of years ago we experienced a breakdown on our way to Chinsali and then Isoka. It proved to be a major problem and forced the cancellation of the remainder of the program.

We have been putting air in the two front tires all trip but we did not expect the problems that developed first. We were traveling out of Serenje heading for Mpika. We stopped along the way for a comfort stop. When we returned to the vehicle and tried to start it we only got the clicking of the solenoid. It would not start. Here we were 70 km out of Mpika and the sun had set on us. We tried consulting with Roy. It was decided that it was the battery and perhaps we could get someone to jump start us. He did not think there were cables in the truck. We stopped one vehicle and they had no cables. We began to look in the truck and found a set. The next person who stopped agreed to give us a jump. After a couple of minutes the truck started and we were on our way again. As we neared Mpika I noticed that the lights were growing dim. This is not a good sign as it indicates that the vehicle is running off of the battery and not the alternator. We kept on until what I knew might happen did occur. The vehicle died. Now we were stuck. Jumping will not help now since the battery is nearly flat and the alternator will not charge it. It is a handy thing to have cell phones now so Charles has called Solomon Mutanga of Mpika and he is locating someone who will come and tow us into where we will lodge.



In the meantime we are talking about what this might mean to our program. We are to overnight in Mpika and then go on to Isoka for our planned seminar there. During our time Mulele has been calling from Isoka and inquiring if I am in the country and if we are still coming. When he hears of our problem he says leave the truck there and I will come and get you. That is an alternative to Roy's suggestion of leaving the vehicle and taking the bus.

Finally Solomon arrives and the men with the truck begin to try to arrange to tow us with a rope. After a couple of breaks they get it going and we slowly head into town. Meanwhile we have talked to Solomon and he knows a young man who knows alternators etc. because he has been trained to work with the railroad so he will bring him in the morning.

By the time we reach our lodging it is later than expected. By the time we eat and visit a bit we see that it is midnight. Time for bed. We will find out about the truck tomorrow.

Early in the morning Solomon arrives with a young man and his box of tools. He listens to what we say and says it sounds like the alternator. Off he goes to look at it and tell us what he believes. In the mean time we cross the road to have breakfast.



While we are eating and visiting a young man approaches Charles that he knows. He is friendly and talkative. I learn later that he is a graduate of the Mapepe school but he preaches for a Pentecostal group. Charles later clarifies that it is a church of Christ but that it has Pentecostal tendencies and practices. That is a problem with some of the churches in the north. He leaves and breakfast is served. First it is cold cereal. But the milk they provide for the cereal is hot. I think this is part of an English breakfast. When the main part is served it is bread, eggs, bacon and beans along with tea. It is a good meal. By this time the young man comes to report that the problem is the alternator. He also reports several other concerns. The battery is flat and low on water and acid. The serpentine belt is worn and loose. It should be replaced. The oil is old and should be replaced. Yes he can repair the alternator. We talk a bit and he will address the battery, the alternator, the oil. He will tighten the belt which will solve that problem for now. If one is available we might replace that (we learn none is available). So we return to the lodge while work is done on the truck.



It is also learned that the bumper bar is loose having lost a bolt and will likely fall off in the near future. That will also be addressed. Our plans were to spend the morning driving to Chinsali and to visit with the brethren there briefly and provide funds for some to travel to the leadership seminar in Isoka and then drive to Isoka in the afternoon and relax until Saturday's program. Eventually everything is finished the man is paid and we leave for Chinsali around 1:30 heading for Isoka 160km away.

Before we leave we need to get diesel. We find that neither station has diesel. That is a problem since we have only one quarter of a tank. We are certain there is diesel available in Isoka. We have carried 40 litres of diesel to help us with this problem so we do not anticipate a difficulty. We know the closer to get to the border with Tanzania the more available fuel will be since it comes across the border. Off we go. Eventually we stop and put one container in. At last we arrive in Chinsali. We need to meet quickly with church members to give them funds for transport. I emphasize that it must be quick as it is nearing 4pm and I want to be in Isoka by dark. Since Serenje the road are getting worse and it is difficult to avoid potholes in the darkness. Off we go and we do indeed reach Isoka just as the sun has set and it is getting toward dark.

I would like to end this here and say that we had no more problems but that is not the case. As we were ending our program on Saturday afternoon we discovered that one of the two front tires had gone flat. There is a small foot pump in the truck so it was used to get enough air in it to take it to the market and have it repaired. We arrive there and they check the tire and find that it is leaking in several places. They pull the spare tire off and

(as I was afraid) it too was flat. When it was tested it was found to be leaking worse than the other. There are no tires this size available in Isoka so it is decided to put in tubes to get us through to the end of the trip. That is done and all seems well.....seems well.

On Sunday after services, lunch and all of the visits and requests we finally set off for Mpika. It is about 270km away. All goes well until.... We hit one of those potholes that you cannot see until the last minute. After this the truck begins to make a noise and we reach the junction to Chinsali a short distance away and pull over. The rear tire is crooked. What to do. Several men prove to be helpful and one is the maintenance supervisor for the police of this district and he proves very knowledgeable. It turns out that we have broken 4 of the 5 studs that hold the wheel on. For this to have happened (we are told) the wheel would not have been tightened down when they moved/changed the tires. He removes a couple of the studs from other wheels to give us a safe number to finish the trip or at least to Lusaka. Now we discover that the spare tire is also flat. It seems that the men at the repair stole the new tubes that we bought and put in old ones. Our man, Banda, calls the man at the shop in Chinsali and asks him to remain and Fredrick goes with one of his helpers to have the tires repaired. In the meantime we wait and visit and speculate.

Another concern that I have had is that occasionally the check engine light comes on and there seems to be a brief reduction in power. It does not last long and everything seems to be running correctly. But we will get to Mpika and look into this if we can.

At last the tires are repaired and we are on our way to Mpika after being stopped for 4 hours. It is now near 9pm. We will not arrive in Mpika until 11 or after. The road becomes worse and I will hold the speed to 80kmh so that we will not hit any potholes especially on that left side rear.

We arrive in Mpika at nearly 11:30. We get checked in and Charles wants to go across the street and get something to eat. We do this and return to the rooms and there is no desire to visit but just to get to bed. This is done. It is now Monday morning. We are waiting for our mechanic and I am finishing this hoping to send it this morning. I am behind on my reports and hope to catch up in the next day or so.

Some great news (Joe I hope you read this)!!!! Last year we had one well that was to be repaired but it was discovered that pipes and rods had fallen in. We were waiting for the council and their man to fish them out. We found a man in one of the villages who said he could do this. The village was complaining to the council about the hardship of no well. We provided funds to Lackson Moonga the preacher in Mapoto and he got the man and took him to the village. We were informed yesterday that the pipes were fished out and as of yesterday the village has water again. Charles will visit there to place the sign on the well and take pictures for me. That was almost the best thing that happened yesterday.

So here we sit thinking of breakfast. We will have the truck looked at and consult with Roy and his mechanic. If all goes well we will go to Mkushi today and meet with the church tomorrow and go to Lusaka the next day.

Well...I did not get this sent. The e-mail place in Mpika does not allow attachments...sorry. I will add to and (hopefully) finish the report on our mechanical issues. No studs were found in Mpika so we will continue with the wheel as it is. Our man Banda said it should be safe. We will try to address it in Lusaka if funds are there. Our young man went and borrowed a book on the problem codes. He spent an hour or so with the truck and informed us that there are several problems mostly related to maintenance. The fuel filter is dirty and that is contributing to the check engine light. Also he discovered that the fuel we got from Isoka was contaminated. The fuel filter will need to be changed. We will also need to get rid of most of what we bought in Isoka. He also says there is a sensor connected to the computer that when it is past maintenance time it will begin to limit speed. It will slowly reduce the speed you can go until the needed maintenance is done. He can "blind" it by unplugging it and it should be OK. Basically by unplugging it you reset it when it is plugged back in. I will get us home. We purchase another fuel filter and our young man replaces it. The truck is working fine. But what to do with the 60 liters of diesel we have from Isoka? It was decided to sell it to some truckers who deal with this thing all the time. We make a deal with the young man. We will give him a percentage of what he gets for the fuel. Off he goes to sell it. There is diesel at the station so replacing it will not be a problem. He gets a pretty good price. Now we will have lunch and then head for Serenje. Serenje is 230 km from Mpika. It is the longest stretch of the trip. The road is not good so it will be a hard drive as we watch for and avoid the potholes. It is also decided that we would like our young mechanic to travel with us to Serenje just in case there are problems. We will provide him with bus fare to return. He agrees. After lunch we load up and depart. First we top up on diesel and refill two of our containers. The third leaked some and we do not want that in the back where all of our bags are located.

The trip to Serenje was without event. We reached there safely and without problems. We paid our young man and gave him bus fare. We will be in contact with him in the future. He is good. But he is also smart. He found a book that would help him and he used it to trace down the problem. We will use him again. Once that is done we fuel up and head for Mkushi where we will spend the night and meet with the church tomorrow. That road is now very good and should be a much easier drive. So I sit in Mkushi finishing this. I do not know if there is e-mail in Mkushi. If there is I will send this today; if not I will have to send it from Kapiri tomorrow. Hopefully there will be not more incidents for this trip.

Keep us (and our truck) in your prayers.

Mushali kabotu!
Charles
Mpika, Zambia